



BETTER BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

—ANDREAS BODE*

We in Germany have all grown up with the fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen. Later on, we followed the adventures of Tom Sawyer and dreamt about Robinson Crusoe and his island. While reading, we travelled to the moon to the centre of the Earth and around the world. The double murder in the Rue Morgue by Edgar Allan Poe made our nerves tingle, and together with Pinocchio and his father we anxiously awaited the going out of the last candle in the shark's tummy.

World literature has become children's classics and children's books have become world literature. Surely, this is not a self-evident truth, because at some time or other, everyone has experienced that books considered a literary treasure in one country have very little meaning or are even completely unknown in other countries.

There are different reasons for this and I should like to mention the most impor-

tant ones:

1. A writer's success in another country largely depends on the existence of a good translation or adaptation.
2. National prejudices, moral and social barriers often prevent good literature from becoming popular in another country.
3. Different economic circumstances and different markets can make it uninteresting to publish editions under licence in other countries.

Some publishers meet such difficulties by suppressing any national peculiarity in children's books and by keeping the text very simple and noncommittal, so that it can easily be translated into other languages. Sometimes, the books are even adapted to suit the target market. For instance, Japanese publishers produce picture books with European-looking characters for the

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non-Asiatic market. No good children's books can come from an "internationalism" without character.

Better books for children, however, are books that do not deny their origin in a certain culture. These books are more likely to be loved and understood by children in the whole world. Actually, it is the fascination with a different world which arouses curiosity and interest. Even more. Here the children's book has a task to accomplish that has already been recognized as such and was promoted by the International Youth Library's founder, Mrs. Jella Lepman, namely to overcome barriers between people.

Or, to quote the words of our current President, Richard Von Weizsacker: "Once we have seen how other people live with their own traditions and culture, we will certainly be better able to live peacefully and sensibly alongside them."

All children should have the opportunity

to become acquainted with the best that other nations can offer. For that purpose, books are better suited than any other media. The topic of this Seminar is about the same thing: Better Books for children.

The virtues of a book above other media, especially the television, have often been mentioned, and I do not want to name them again. The most important advantage seems to me that a book is always available, and that, as a child, one can love it like a favourite doll. And what kind of book would be more appropriate to be picked out and read over and over again than a fairy tale book? Fairy tales can be a good way to better understand other cultures. The best way, of course, would always be to understand the language of another nation. However, this is impossible! Yet, there are picture books. They are splendid mediators between nations, for, they can overcome language barriers more easily. So, when asking for Better Books for Children, we must not forget the picture books.